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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the linguistic differences in the spontaneous speech of language-deviant children in two very different situations. Spontaneous speech samples of eleven five-year-old language-deviant children were obtained from: (1) the traditional adult-child therapy situation using appropriate stimulus materials; and (2) groups of three children alone, in a room with a tape recorder and a live rabbit. Analysis revealed important differences in use of syntax, length of utterance, and the functions of language in the two settings. The problem of obtaining representative spontaneous language samples is discussed. (Author)

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SITUATIONAL INFLUENCES ON THE SPONTANEOUS SPEECH OF LANGUAGE DEVIANT CHILDREN

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Spontaneous speech samples of eleven five-year-old language deviant children were obtained from two different situations:

(1) from the traditional adult-child therapy situation using appropriate stimulus materials,

(2) from groups of three children alone, in a room with a tape recorder and a live rabbit.

Analysis revealed important differences in use of syntax, length of utterance, and the functions of language in the two settings. The problem of obtaining representative spontaneous language samples is discussed.

SITUATIONAL INFLUENCES OF THE SPONTANEOUS SPEECH OF LANGUAGE DEVIANT CHILDREN

The analysis of spontaneous speech samples of language deviant children has been used extensively in recent years for the purpose of identifying language problems, determining which language structures have and have not been stabilized, creating language development programs, and measuring progress in therapy. Several quantitative measures have been developed which, in addition to linguistic description, score spontaneous speech samples, thus providing normative data. Those most commonly used are the Developmental Sentence Analysis (Lee, 1974), the Length Complexity Index (Miner, 1969), and the Mean Length of Response (McCarthy, 1954). The success and accuracy of language description and quantification depends entirely on how representative the spontaneous speech samples are of children's actual linguistic competence. Labov (1970) believes that adult-child communication is usually an inaccurate measure of a child's language because of the adult's insistence that the child perform to the tester's expectations. He demonstrated that child-child communication is ofter much richer in content and linguistic information than that obtained in an adult-child situation. On the other hand, Pine (1973) has shown that utterances are longer and more complex when children are in conversation with an adult in a clinical situation than when communicating spontaneously at home. Lee (1974) indicates that language deviant children are not as spontaneous as normal children with language use in unstructured situations. She believes that interaction between a clinician and the language deviant child is essential to obtaining a representative language sample. A study to uncover the actual differences of language use in varying situations for language deviant children has not been completed.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the linguistic differences in language deviant children's spontaneous speech in two very different situations. The first situation was the traditional adult-child setup which is used routinely in clinics and schools to gather language samples. This entailed the use of appropriate toys, pictures, and stories which were presented to the children in a controlled fashion by the clinician. The second situation was totally unstructured and uncontrolled except for the stimulus materials. Following the procedure outlined by Labov (1970), groups of three children who knew each other were asked to care for a live rabbit during one-half hour in a room free of distractions except for a tape recorder which was playing in plain view. Eleven five year old children who were enrolled for language remediation at Northwestern University were used for this study. Each had been accurately diagnosed as language deviant.

The individual and group language samples for each child were analyzed and compared in great detail as to the type of utterances (statements, questions, imperatives, etc.), the length of utterance, the types and number of syntactic errors, grammatical complexity, and the number of correct versus incorrect utterances. The most significant results are listed below.

1. There was an abundant and rich use of language in both situations.

2. According to MLU scores, utterances in the traditional setting were significantly longer when a t-test for related measures was computed ($p < .01$). Only one child of the eleven decreased his length of utterance in the traditional setting.

3. There were more grammatical errors in the traditional setting in proportion to the total number of structures used.

4. Five of the eleven children attempted to use more complex structures (according to DSS hierarchies) in the traditional setting. This was true only for main verbs and pronouns. The other children used similar structures in both situations.

5. The percentage of completely correct sentences was larger for the group situation (61%) than for the traditional situation (45%). This was mostly due to errors in verb usage.

6. The types of utterances in the two situations were extremely different. In the traditional situation mainly declarative statements were used with much naming and story telling. In the group, however, the children's utterances were predominantly negatives and questions. The language used in the groups was functional, while it seemed somewhat academic in the individual sessions.

7. DSS scores in the two situations are listed below and were surprisingly close in view of the above differences:

SUBJECT	GROUP	TRADITIONAL
1	2.74	3.09
2	3.87	2.70
3	5.20	6.12
4	5.14	4.16
5	5.00	6.36
6	7.30	7.64
7	5.85	5.40
8	6.04	6.62
9	5.80	5.66
10	4.74	7.16
11	4.36	3.66

Subject #10 produced the only extremely different scores (2.42 points). There was no significant difference between these scores using a t-test for repeated measures. This finding suggests that the DSS score may be a fairly robust measure of grammatical complexity even in different situational contexts. The traditional setting generally produced long utterances with many errors, thus reducing a child's DSS score, while the group setting produced many short, accurate sentences which maintained the score.

8. Many of the same syntactic structures were used both correctly and incorrectly within the same language sample. These structures were correctly used more consistently in the groups. This indicates that these structuees were in a process of stabilization.

This study indicates that the traditional method of obtaining a language sample is probably best for analyzing a child's grammatical errors if only one testing session is possible. Much information is usually missed in this method about a child's use of negatives, questions, and imperatives, which constitute a major portion of his functional language. These functions are important in planning individualized language development programs and should be investigated. To obtain an accurate assessment of a child's language requires observation of the child at different times with different people and in different situations.

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